

January 31, 2007

My name is Colette Gray and I am the Community Advocate at Opportunities, Inc. in Great Falls. I am here to share this story from our Energy Ombudsman who could not be here today.

My name is Tammy Mulheim and I work for Opportunities, Inc. (HRDC V) in the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP) and I am also the Energy Ombudsman. I see the many energy needs of clients on a daily basis. As you know, the LIEAP program has income and resource guidelines. A large number of clients seem to be a little over income and need some kind of help with their energy crisis but have nowhere to turn. With this Ombudsman program I am able to help so many more clients. After I find out what the energy emergency is, I am able to make referrals at our agency or other agencies in our community.

With the LIEAP funding cycle starting on October 1<sup>st</sup> and ending on April 30<sup>th</sup> the ability to help with energy emergencies in the remaining four months of the year was virtually non existent until the Ombudsman program started.

The Energy Ombudsman program allowed Opportunities, Inc. to continue helping people during the months when LIEAP was not in operation.

I had a situation that just recently occurred when a client came into my office looking for help with her energy emergency. She is a single mother with three children under the age of 18 and works a fulltime job. She had disconnect notices from both the gas and electric companies and was also in danger of having her water shut off.

This hard working mother has had a lot of medical problems and has been hospitalized over a half of dozen times in the last year. The medical bills are so outrageous even though she is covered by insurance; she has been spending her wages on medical care. Now it has gotten so bad that she has to pay cash for every visit to the specialist and doctors' offices.

While applying for LIEAP in my office, I was able to take the extra time to evaluate her situation and referred her to a variety of programs including: Energy Share of Montana, Emergency Services, Food Stamps, WIA youth program and Consumer Credit Counseling.

This is just one of the families that I help on a daily basis. The need is so great that without the Ombudsman program, many of these families that are trying to become self-sufficient would continue to fall through the cracks. Without access to the resources that we are able to refer them to, I truly believe that these families would still be juggling their finances if they had no one to help them.

Thank you for your time,  
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